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Graves, Frank Pierrepont

An aristocracy of service

Ithaca, N.Y.

1925

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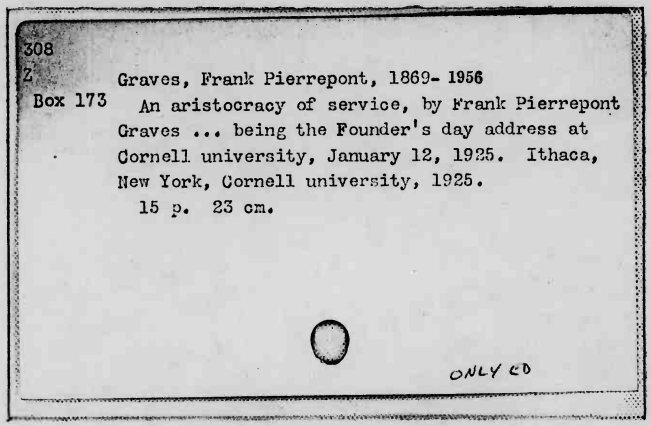

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An aristocracy of service, by Frank Pierrepont Graves ... being the Founder's day address at Cornell university, January 12, 1925. Ithaca, New York, Cornell university, 1925.
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An Aristocracy of Service

BY

FRANK PIERREPONT GRAVES

President of the University of the State of New York
and State Commissioner of Education

Being the Founder's Day Address at
Cornell University, January 12, 1925

Ithaca, New York
Published by Cornell University
1925

An Aristocracy of Service

FOUNDER'S DAY ADDRESS AT CORNELL UNIVERSITY
JANUARY 12, 1925

I *WOULD found an institution where any person can find instruction in any study.*" In these simple but immortal words the Founder of Cornell University expressed the motive that impelled him. Hackneyed as the quotation has become, it is so because of its significance, and we have no apology to make for using it here. It has often served as a text for eloquent sermons, and it is and ever will be an inspiring theme for Founder's Day addresses. Moreover, a continual reexamination and application of it to present conditions has the sanction of respectability. Such procedure is, for example, in harmony with the higher critic's faith in a progressive revelation or with the dynamic conception of truth held by pragmatic philosophers. Likewise, devoted Hellenists still claim that the source of all modern thought is found through constantly reflecting new light upon Plato and Aristotle. Although the most ardent admirers of the farsighted Cornell might hesitate to include his declaration within any of these categories, it may yet be worth while upon this his birthday to undertake to interpret the Cornellian *shibboleth* anew and to inquire as to how far we have kept the faith.

At the outset it should be noted to the credit of Ezra Cornell that he was actuated by a well defined purpose,—something more than the mere perpetuation of his name, the gratification of vanity, or a desire for power. With two or three notable exceptions, American universities seem to have set no real scholastic goal, but simply to have drifted into whatever efficiency and prominence they happen to have attained. With reference to most educational institutions Schopenhauer would be perfectly justified in holding that the will is "blind." Whereas the sagacious founder of Cornell University from the first possessed a clear vision of the important service that he wished his institution to perform for the advancement of civilization.

Ezra Cornell, living in a period of marvelous scientific progress and rapid material expansion, had the insight to perceive the imperative need of supplying leaders in every field of applied science.

In spite of the fact that higher institutions in his day afforded little or no training outside of the traditional courses in Classics, Mathematics, and what was later described by President Eliot as "the dogmatism of second-rate minds, misnamed Philosophy," he insistently held that serious academic attention should also be given to the demands of the times. Happily his vision extended far beyond that of those abortive earlier attempts in New York at a new type of college located at Ovid and Havana. He did not interpret the educational *desideratum* as merely vocational and industrial training, but undertook to found on the most attractive site in America a genuine seat of learning devoted to the welfare of the people in all respects. His view may have been broadened by contact with that great world seer, Andrew D. White, whom he early associated with himself in this endeavor, but certain it is that the university of Cornell was from its beginning intended to maintain scholastic and cultural ideals, as well as to meet modern needs and requirements. He "would found an institution where any person can find instruction in *any study*."

This broad-minded Founder sought not only to train for leadership in all lines, but to raise up as many leaders as possible for society. To him it appeared shortsighted to confine the opportunity for higher education to the wealthy or the socially elect, as the custom had been; he maintained that the nation should secure the widespread advantages that would accrue from training all its genius. He wished to extend the possibility of development to every one who could profit by it, regardless of financial nexus or social status. The course was never to become so expensive that only the well-to-do could secure it, but students were to be admitted "at the lowest rates of expense consistent with welfare and efficiency." Hence, in order that society might be advanced by a fruitful increase in leaders of every sort, Ezra Cornell determined that he "would found an institution where *any person* can find instruction in any study."

With this review of the background, we may proceed to an evaluation of Cornell's creed. Here we should first applaud his wise desire to develop leadership. The importance of leaders to civilized society can scarcely be overestimated. Average individuals can for a while conserve the achievements of the race and keep the activities of everyday life in operation, but they must ever look to intellectual superiors for new steps in progress, which alone can keep the world from stagnation. Such leaders have throughout history initiated

our inventions and discoveries, bridged our rivers and tunneled our mountains, organized our industries, instituted social reforms, mitigated human suffering, sin, and ignorance, produced our inspiring literature and works of art, and written our greatest constitutions. We must realize that, if at any time our leaders should altogether fail to get into action, civilization would quickly slip back again into barbarism.

If leaders, then, have played so important a part in social progress, we may well agree with the Founder that it is essential to secure the maximum of benefit from as great a number and variety of these guides as possible. But should we assume, as Cornell may be interpreted to have done, that any number of leaders can be readily produced through proper education? Are not leaders, like the poets, "born and not made"? Should we hold that they are created by circumstances and university training, rather than that they are purely a gift of nature? Or, to state the problem in its usual form, is capacity for leadership to be accounted the product of environment or of heredity, or of both?

This question has long been mooted by educational philosophers, and wide differences of opinion have been expressed and vigorously defended. Although no philosopher is ever entirely consistent, since a point of view can be attained only at the expense of some of the facts, such men as Rousseau and Froebel seem to hold that intellectual attainments are purely a matter of birth and natural development, while contemporaries of theirs, Locke and Herbart, maintain that there is nothing present at the start and concede very little to any other factor than training and a construction from the outside. But such solutions as these are altogether too facile, and any one who knows his Kant will hesitate to accept the conclusion either that our mental development is completely innate and implicit or that nothing besides an impressionable tablet exists at birth.

Perhaps the classic controversy as to the basis of leadership—certainly the one that has attracted most attention during the past half century—is that between the English savant, Francis Galton, and our own fellow countryman, Lester F. Ward. Both of these thinkers were themselves intellectual leaders and contributed largely to half a dozen of the same natural and social sciences. But Galton was primarily a biologist and stressed the development of the individual, while Ward was one of the earlier expositors of modern sociology and leaned toward a social point of view. Galton invented

the term "eugenics" to represent his propaganda and maintained that we might rapidly produce a gifted race through select and judicious mating. Ward, on the other hand, held that a large part of ability is not transmissible but is acquired through opportunity, and that genius, being only potential, is best promoted by furnishing the right environment. In his judgment the way to increase the efficiency of mankind is not merely through eugenics, but by finding and utilizing all the environmental influences that have contributed most to the production of efficient leaders.

So attractive is the discussion of these intellectual giants that it may be of interest to follow their arguments a little further. Galton is so much of a genetic determinist that he announces at the outset of his *Hereditary Genius:*

> "I propose to show in this book that man's natural abilities are derived by inheritance, under exactly the same limitations as are the form and physical features of the whole organic world."

That is to say, according to Galton, man's mental capacity, like his height, his muscular strength, or the coloration of his eyes or hair, for example, is derived entirely from his ancestors by a definite law. In his judgment, the possibilities of development through training are exceedingly limited, and if a man is gifted with real intellectuality, it can not be repressed even under most rigid and untoward conditions. This thesis Galton substantiates statistically by an examination of the relatives of men who have attained to great prominence in England,—judges, statesmen, commanders, men of letters and science, poets, painters, musicians, divines, and modern scholars. He finds that the number of geniuses is comparatively small and that a considerable portion of them are interrelated. Three hundred families, he shows, have furnished more than one thousand eminent men. Moreover, in each case it appears that the ablest men have had the largest number of able relatives.

In answer to this, Ward maintains in his *Applied Sociology* (Chaps. VIII–X) that the English scientist has erred in confusing high position with genius, and that many rare minds are never heard from because they have lacked the opportunity to develop or to become known. Distinguished men are those who have superior mental endowment, and, in addition, have had a chance to use their talents. Mental qualities Ward concedes to be hereditary, but holds that they are not necessarily all-powerful and will not prevail over

each and every obstacle. He admits that civilization has been advanced by comparatively few leaders, but insists that these *de facto* agents of civilization do not represent the entire working force. There still exists a large latent element, which might be developed by proper training. Genius is constant and abundant in every rank of society, but opportunity, which should be extended to all, is at present extremely variable. Were opportunity, in Ward's opinion, as constant and abundant as genius, the fecundity of talent would increase a thousandfold.

As a whole, Ward seems to view the question from a broader angle and to have rather the better of the argument. He would agree with Ezra Cornell in the proposition that if we wish to increase the number and efficiency of our leaders, we must extend to all classes opportunity for training in every line. This would appear to be a wise course. Certainly up to date we have achieved very little through heredity and eugenics by themselves. There has apparently been no marked physical or mental change in the race during the twenty-five thousand years more or less since, in the course of evolution, the first Cro-Magnon men began their activities. A census of the characteristics of the ordinary run of mankind at the present time makes us extremely skeptical concerning any noteworthy advance in the nature of inherited intelligence. One needs but examine cursorily the contradictory records of the various parties in the recent National campaign, the arrant credulity displayed in the controversy of the Fundamentalists with the Modernists, the widespread sale of patent medicines and the prevalence of "faith cures," or the frantic endeavor of legislatures to establish an easier value for *pi* or to regulate the teaching of organic evolution,—to sense how far superstition, irrationalism, emotionalism, sentimentality, and even Cave Man reactions endure and control in this present boasted age of enlightenment and reason. It scarcely seems likely that any people have ever appeared in modern times that can be considered the equals (not to say superiors) of those Athenian Greeks who two and a half millennia ago attained such a high general level and produced so many intellectual giants.

But do not misunderstand me. We can not, of course, deny the immense advancement that the race has made in civilization since the days of ancient Hellas. Through cooperative and specialized effort we have accumulated and transmitted a wide control over both ourselves and the forces of nature. Constant progress is wit-

nessed by the extensive developments in science, art, industry, commerce, agriculture, government, literature, and religion since the Age of Pericles. But all this has been due to an increase in social inheritance rather than to a development of mentality. Obviously these contributions have been handed down through training, without leaving any appreciable impression upon the germ cells of humanity. And it would appear to be through progress of this sort that most developments in the future must arise. As both Ezra Cornell and Lester F. Ward foresaw, if we are to raise the level of racial achievement, we shall have to depend very largely upon suitable environment and education. The course of natural selection and evolution is altogether too slow.

But, it may be objected, we have never given the "eugenics" recommended by Galton a fair trial. So Albert Edward Wiggam (*The New Decalogue of Science*, p. 99) has recently declared:

> "Three thousand years after the Hebrew statesmen incorporated eugenics into their civil and canon law; twenty-four hundred years after Plato gave the science of eugenics its formulation in political philosophy; two thousand years after Jesus reinforced its moral and religious sanctions; sixty years after Darwin discovered its organizing principle in natural law; fifty years after Sir Francis Galton placed it clearly and finally among the analytical sciences; thirty years after Weisman proved that it was the only secure hope of human improvement; twenty years after Mendel gave it its biological mechanics and experimental method, I seem still to hear you inquiring in vague, mystified wonder, 'What is eugenics?'"

Such ignorance is unfortunately evident in practice as well as theory. Even here at the close of the first quarter of the twentieth century, we do not understand the significance or importance of eugenic principles. We do not begin to give the attention to human mating that we expend upon the scientific breeding of lower animals. Kittens and puppies born under the hybrid conditions that we tolerate without a protest in human beings would be promptly consigned to a watery grave, and any stock raiser who utilized his best blooded sires and dams to as little effect as modern society does its most worthy parenthood would be a fit subject for the bankrupts' court or even a state hospital for the insane.

As yet we are doing little or nothing to prevent the union and perpetuation of tuberculars, sense defectives, epileptics, imbeciles,

and idiots, or to interfere with the transmission of venereal taints. Celibacy, prostitution, divorce, fear of *mésalliance*, and postponement of marriage until luxurious living is assured, have already thwarted the incarnation of numerous generations of brilliant minds. Men of intelligence are largely constrained to evade the procreation of their kind; not so the unintellectual and the imprudent. The name of their offspring is Legion. The membership of college faculties regularly averages one child to each couple, although parents from the steerage and the slums look upon ten as an irreducible minimum. The more vigorous men are still being removed by wars, and an equal number of high-grade women are being left without suitable mates, while the unfit remnants cheerfully continue to multiply. We could scarcely take fewer precautions to prevent adulteration of our best stock and to eliminate the propagation of the unfit. With the use of a tithe of our increased knowledge and control, we could, in the course of a few generations, vastly improve the race both physically and mentally, and raise inestimably the general level of intelligence and the possibilities of leadership.

But it is in this very process of artificial selection and voluntary control that the whole *crux* of the situation seems to rest. It is because of the difficulty of rationalizing human instincts and impulses that we find the greatest value in Ward's amendment to the Galtonian theory and in the importance of the wider training desired by Ezra Cornell. Racial improvement would proceed at less than snail's pace, or not at all, if left entirely to its own devices. At present the average individual too often regards all social control as an interference and a menace. From Plato's day until now the world has been exceedingly loth to create an Ideal State through adherence to the dictates of the "philosophers." In the popular creed, one man's opinion is as good as another's, and we still refuse to be guided by expert or friend in the choice of a mate. Those of us who were naïve enough in our younger days to undertake to advise another—man or woman—to select a different life companion from the one contemplated found that, despite our good intentions, we succeeded only in making two permanent enemies.

No, if we are to hope for any marked rise in either the physical or the intellectual level of the race, our *laissez faire* procedure must be corrected and supplemented by presentation and application of the abundant knowledge that we have inherited on the subject. The institution of a regime of eugenics will be impossible without further training and broadcast promulgation of its principles. Even

Wiggam, latest apostle of the eugenic gospel, declares that the biologist who increases our knowledge of the field, must "enlist the services of our writers, artists, idealists, and philosophers, in order to educate the outlook and perspective of both the statesman and the man on the street." (*New Decalogue of Science*, p. 107.) Hence the only corrective and effective means for overcoming the obstacles to development of leaders and to racial progress through Galton's idea of eugenics is to be found in universal and adequate opportunities for education, as pointed out by Ward and by Cornell. Without the right environment and training, the finest potential heredity and leadership will prove but slow and halting in their movement, and must certainly lag far behind the needs of the times.

In connection with a discussion of the importance of universal opportunities for education, it is not altogether fanciful to note that both Galton and Ward are sincere and typical products of their respective countries. It is but logical for an Englishman to hold that leadership is practically altogether a matter of heredity. Almost with his mother's milk he has absorbed the impression that there exists a natural intellectual aristocracy, which, possessing most of the world's supply of genius, hands it on to its offspring. Those beloved of the gods, he holds, should properly receive the benefit of the best education, but even when deprived of it, their light can not be altogether "hidden under a bushel." Genius, like murder, will out. Occasionally, when, by a *lusus naturae*, a leader inexplicably arises among the barbarians, some provision should be made for him through scholarships and transfers to the great "public"schools; but this is a matter of such rare occurrence as scarcely to vary the general rule. Of course, the selective theory in English education has been gradually breaking down since the Act of 1870 and the growth of "provincial" universities, and has been almost demolished by the democratizing influences of the World War, but it is still quite consistent with Galton's *milieu* to hold it a self-evident truth that genius is confined to a small group and that all higher education should be similarly limited.

On the other hand, we people of America, among whom Ward and Cornell were reared, incline toward a very different attitude. It has gradually become almost an educational axiom with us that every one should be permitted without let or hindrance to obtain just as much education as he is capable of consuming, without regard to social position, and almost without consideration of cost. While our theory has at many points broken down, we have continued to maintain with Ezra Cornell that the doors of the university should swing wide to every student of brains and industry. For the sake of developing as much genius and leadership as possible, no youth of ability, we hold, should be prevented from entering college through lack of financial support or through inability to find there the subjects that his type of genius requires. If the rising cost of living has compelled us to supplement the endowment and appropriations of our higher institutions with larger fees, friends of Cornell at least will insist that the amount of the scholarship funds ought in some way to be correspondingly increased. We can never, with our traditions and ideals, consistently refuse admission to any brilliant and deserving student, unless we are forced to do so by an ineluctable stringency in resources.

It is unfortunate, however, that we Americans seem so often to have accompanied our generous conception of universal education with the absurd implication that all persons are born with equal ability and possibilities, and should be given exactly the same training, as well as the same opportunities. No such want of discrimination can be read into Cornell's desire to furnish instruction to every person in any study. It is fairly evident that America has, as a whole, by no means shown as much discernment as it might in determining the amount of education that should be furnished each individual. There is no more pathetic spectacle than the futile efforts of certain youths to lift the ponderous burden of a collegiate education when they have reached the limit of the intellectual strength with which they were endowed. Their lofty ambition and dogged persistence are admirable and worthy of commendation, but they are frightfully misapplied and wasteful. Shall we never learn that all Americans can not do everything and that there are some occupations in life that are honorable and of good report beside those requiring a college training?

Thanks to the War, though, the land of Ward and Cornell, like that of Galton, has of late had its educational complacency rudely shaken, though by a shock of the opposite sort. We Americans have at length come to have some misgivings as to the wisdom of admitting to college every one who applies. In addition to having grave doubts concerning our educational theory, the accumulated after-the-war load, the wider distribution of wealth, and the obvious material advantages of higher training have collectively brought such vast hordes to our college gates as to make the reception of them all a physical impossibility. So we have been coming to make

a virtue of necessity and to pause long enough to ask ourselves who should be allowed the privileges of higher education. Hence we have recently heard much about the necessity of limiting college admission to those who are able to get most out of the training. President Hopkins is reputed to have first applied the phrase "an aristocracy of brains" to the *clientèle* to which Dartmouth College aspires, and the presidents of Brown, Colgate, Bates, and other colleges have expressed similar ideas in connection with their respective institutions. There has, in fact, come to be a general assent to the proposition that only students of reasonably strong intelligence should enter college. If we desire to create leaders, we certainly should not handicap ourselves too much by the admission of poor material.

Possibly this conclusion has been hastened by the ease and popularity of "intelligence testing," which has likewise gained its vogue as a by-product of the war. At any rate, in numerous institutions psychological examinations have recently come to be somewhat utilized in selecting the "aristocracy of brains." Fortunately these tests have not generally been considered altogether infallible, and a laudable caution is being shown in their use. Most colleges now regard them as but a single form of measure and employ them as one of several factors in the final determination. The scores made in the tests are ordinarily compared with and checked against school records, orthodox entrance examinations, and the opinion of local alumni and others who have had an opportunity to become acquainted with the various candidates.

It is certainly well that we should not at present become so enthusiastic concerning intelligence tests as to use them to the exclusion of all other forms of selection. Any one who has employed them knows that ghastly errors may be made through panic over their novelty, unfamiliarity with the vagaries of the English language, or attempted facetiousness on the part of the student. Moreover, we are at present by no means certain as to just what constitutes intelligence or whether we have taken account of all ingredients that enter into the complex, and until a satisfactory analysis is made, any simplification is likely to be more or less artificial. Experience shows that moral qualities, such as industry, perseverance, loyalty, courage, and integrity, or social abilities, like a sense of humor, tact, sympathy, and affability, for which no effective tests have yet been devised, are frequently of much more consequence in determining leadership and success than is abstract intelligence. Clearly we should afford

every variety of intelligence the utmost development possible, if we are to secure the benefit of all our genius. Moreover, in a democracy it is all-important that higher education should be as widespread as is practicable, in order that the people may select their officials with the utmost insight and may not become the prey of superstition, fanaticism, graft, or demagogy. In deciding upon who is fit for college training, we must use as much latitude and liberality as possible.

Nevertheless, the attempt to limit higher education to those who will make it of some real profit to themselves and society—a necessity brought home to us by the war—may well be considered a healthful tendency, if it is but broadly construed. While our analysis of the situation may have proved inadequate and some intangible values may not yet have been metered, we surely should not resort to obscurantism and scorn every semblance of scientific procedure. Intelligence tests are still in a rough and unrefined stage, but, if they can be made to take account of all factors and can be used with proper caution, they may eventually become of considerable value in selecting those who are to be educated for leadership. For his own sake, as well as for that of others, the extreme dullard and sub-normal should not be tormented with training beyond his power. He has a place and may be of service in the world but he will scarcely be fitted for it through college education.

Yet, in selecting the few to be trained for leadership, there are other characteristics to be considered besides the intellectual. Certainly two of the moral qualities mentioned above, which have too often fallen out of the academic perspective, would seem to be a *sine qua non*, and should be especially stressed. These are the capacities for industry and for perseverance. Whatever justification may have been found at his college by Doctor MacCosh, or whoever else was responsible for the famous parody—

> " 'Tis better to have gone and loafed,
> Than never to have gone at all"—

this excuse assuredly ought not to be offered in any institution that either asks for public moneys or seeks benefactions on the score of training leaders for society. Leadership can not be attained by the indolent or weak-willed, however intellectual, and trust funds, whether obtained through endowment or appropriation from the state, must be devoted to the purpose for which they were given, if the trustees are not to be held guilty of malfeasance. It should be remembered, too, that even the student who pays the highest

possible tuition fee is in principle, if not in degree, quite as much a beneficiary as the man on a scholarship or in attendance at a free institution. No one ever pays the real cost of a college training. Certainly, if we hold that the dull student should properly find the scene of his activities outside of college walls, how much more should this be the case with the idle and dissolute! The one is at least doing all that he can to increase the talent intrusted to him, but the other has carefully concealed his and laid it aside in a napkin. If the sort of college depicted in *The Plastic Age* appealed to our sense of accuracy and truth, we should have little excuse for maintaining such institutions of learning.

As a matter of fact, if we must seek a slogan to arouse our spirits in the academic struggle, an "aristocracy of service," rather than an "aristocracy of brains," should be chosen to urge us toward the proper goal of university training. That was clearly the underlying motive of Ezra Cornell. And will not you, Cornellians, each

> "Do as your progenitors have done,
> And, by their virtues, prove yourself their son"?

It may be that elimination of the intellectually unfit is a step in the right direction, but the brilliant student will be of little value to the world if he fails to make the most of his opportunities or to use them in the service of the society that has granted him special privileges. If we argue for the right of society to overrule the desires of an individual or the ambitions of his parents and to close the college doors to all save a select group of young people, we certainly should impress those who are granted admission with the meaning of social obligation, and inculcate in them a strong desire to work for the common good.

Even the most gifted youth has no natural right to the advantages of a college education, since the only justification for his receiving opportunities of which others have been deprived is that of a larger return to society. He can not well expect to receive this special attention as a reward for an ability for which he is not himself in the least responsible. He should be taught that such a privilege has been given him in order that his development may contribute liberally toward social welfare. Indeed the more highly endowed he is, the more sensitive should he be made to this obligation. If a higher education is to be added to his natural gifts, it will proportionately increase his already large capacity for good or ill. If, as the possessor of both intelligence and training, he were to use

his powers for strictly selfish, predatory, or criminal ends, no more sinister influence or profound disservice could be rendered society than a higher education for this individual. Were the universities to devote themselves to rearing Leopolds and Loebs, as the yellow press has of late seemed to imply they are doing, the sooner they were swept out of existence the better it would be for the world. Endowment and maintenance of education of this sort would be more of a bane than a blessing. And, pushed to its logical extreme, such a policy could lead to nothing but social suicide.

With our social problems and needs, then, as great as they are today, we should strive to select our leaders wisely and, in addition, train them definitely for the service of society. How else can we hope either to spread the racial attainments that have come down to us by social inheritance or to add to the conquests that we have already achieved? There is still a wide range of superstitions and abuses to be overcome, and it should be both the function and the privilege of university trained leaders to struggle to their utmost to further the control of society over nature and to contribute continually toward the abolition of ignorance, poverty, disease, and crime. These obstacles to social welfare may well challenge the best valor of the college man, and where those who go forth as leaders select such abuses, rather than their own selfish ends, as the objects of their conquest, college training will be understood to be economically and ethically well worth while.

Some such view of the mission of the institution he would found, though "seen through a glass, darkly," must have animated Ezra Cornell. And as three score years ago his mind's eye vaguely beheld these modern knights buckling on their armor to do valiant service for the cause of civilization and progress, his emotions must have been stirred and his determination steeled. Can you wonder that he was willing to devote his fortune, his energies, and his life to such a project? Surely you, his successors and beneficiaries, with all your modern resources and increased opportunities, can not prove recreant to the trust and unworthy of the Founder in your selection and nurturing of an "aristocracy of service." Give ear, then, to Alma Mater as she utters her kindly admonition:

> O'er knights so bold, in days of old,
> *Noblesse oblige* held sway,
> Cornellians, all, rise to the call,
> And prove its truth today.

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